

The background of the cover features a woman in a historical setting, possibly a kitchen or a room with a stone fireplace. She is wearing a white headscarf and a white long-sleeved blouse with a dark red apron. She is holding a large, light-colored cloth that is heavily stained with blood. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, orange glow from a fire in the fireplace on the right. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

The Maidservant and the Murderer

A Midwife Mystery

Sam Thomas

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THE MAIDSERVANT AND THE MURDERER

A MIDWIFE SHORT MYSTERY

SAM THOMAS



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Author's Note

In the process of writing *The Midwife's Tale*, the first Bridget Hodgson mystery, I created Bridget's nemesis, a malevolent woman named Rebecca Hooke. As I wrote, I found myself fascinated by how much Bridget and Rebecca had in common: both were strong women trying to make their way in a world dominated by men; both had married foolish men; and both had – at some point–practiced midwifery. Despite these similarities, these women found themselves living very different lives. Bridget used her power and knowledge to help the women around her, while Rebecca used hers to destroy her enemies and advance her own interests.

The question that his raised in my mind was simple: How did Rebecca end up such a hateful woman? “The Maidservant and the Murderer” is my attempt to answer that question.

Give me mine angle; we'll to the river: there,
My music playing far off, I will betray
Tawny-finn'd fishes; my bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws; and, as I draw them up,
I'll think them every one an Antony,
And say 'Ah, ha! you're caught.'

—William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, II, iv.

I

If the Hookes expected me on that day, they made no sign of it, and Mrs. Hooke did not even pretend she was glad I'd come.

"You must be Rebecca," she declared when she opened the door. "Why are you just standing there?" She dropped a newly used chamber pot at my feet, and its contents slopped out and soiled the edges of my skirt.

"Clean that up," she barked.

And so, on a fall day in the year of our Lord 1620, I began my time in service.

* * *

I hadn't expected such rude treatment, of course. I hadn't known what to expect. I was seventeen and had left my mother's arms a week before as I traveled to York. The harvest had not been as bountiful as we had hoped, and my parents worried that when winter came, some in the family would go hungry. As the oldest child, it made sense to send me out, and a cousin in the city said she could find me a place as a maidservant. What more could we have asked of God?

To this day, I remember when I first laid eyes on York. I had been riding in the back of a farmer's cart for near two days, stuffed in among sacks of grain and vegetables. We were still some miles away when we crested a hill and the city came into view. Even from such a distance I could not but be amazed. The Minster towered over all else, higher than anything I could have imagined, and smoke hovered over the city, spured there by thousands of hearths. And once we passed through the city gates, the smell, God in His heaven, the smell. Of course a city arse stinks no worse than its country cousin—but in York there were so many gathered so close that the stench was inescapable.

The farmer laughed when he saw my face.

"They say you get used to it after a while. I never have, but I never stay any longer than I must."

When I arrived in the city I sought out my cousin, who had made good on her promise to find me a place. The Hookes had recently dismissed one servant and were looking for a replacement. After a night's sleep, I repacked my bag and walked out Micklegate Bar toward the Hookes' farm. Before leaving, I helped myself to a few shillings I'd found in an unlocked chest. I knew that my cousin would be blamed, and said a prayer that her master would not beat her too badly.

There were just three members of the Hooke family still living in the house when I arrived. Mr. John Hooke was my master, and his wife, Grace, was my mistress. Together they'd had a half-dozen children, though by the time I came to them all but one had died or left for London. Their son Richard had stayed, in part because of his youth—he was not yet twenty—but mostly, I thought, because of his foolishness. It was a hard world for the weak and the stupid, and Richard was both. His parents could afford to keep him so they did. I tried not to begrudge him that luxury, even as I emptied his piss-pot every morning.

For the most part, Richard avoided me as much as he could. At first I thought it was out of fear of his mother, for when she became angry at me—as she often did—her rage knew neither direction nor discretion. Anyone in eyeshot, whether husband, son, or neighbor, risked joining me among the wounded unless they fled the battlefield. But as I grew less anxious, or perhaps became inured to his mother's rages, I realized that I was wrong. Richard didn't avoid me; he just followed me from a distance. Indeed, once I became aware of his presence, it could not be missed. When I milked the cow, he wandered in to the barn in search of his hat. When I was in the buttery, he would come to the kitchen for some cheese. And when I had to go into the city, he would volunteer to accompany me. Richard never spoke to me during these long walks together, but in time I realized that he had fallen quite in love with me.

And to speak God's truth, it made me happy, for whatever his flaws, he was a kind lad. Some nights as I drifted off to sleep I wondered if we might someday marry.

Richard's parents were of another sort entirely, so different from Richard that I could not see how he was their son. At first Mrs. Hooke was the hardest of the two, for she would beat me sore for the slightest offense. Whether it was how I churned the butter, washed her skirts, or milked their cow, Mrs. Hooke found some fault and commenced to clouting me with

whatever she had at hand. For a time I kept a list of all the weapons she used: soup ladle, broom, milking stool, churn-staff, rolling pin, barrel stave, and one time the dull edge of a knife. After half a year, I gave up my list. It would have been easier to name the weapons she *hadn't* used. All this time, I could not help thinking that she hated me, and I spent many cold and sleepless nights searching my conscience for some secret sin I had committed against her. But one afternoon, when the Hookes thought I was busied elsewhere, I learned the true reason.

I'd just finished hanging the laundry when I slipped into the kitchen and heard Mr. and Mrs. Hooke talking in the dining hall. I'd developed a talent for moving about without making much noise—so much the better for avoiding Mrs. Hooke's wrath—so they did not hear me enter.

"I see the way you look at that new whore, and I'll not have you lechering about yet again."

"Grace, I never would," Mr. Hooke objected, and for a moment I wondered who this new whore was.

"*Oh, Rebecca, that dress favors you. Oh, Rebecca, bring me some bread. Oh, Rebecca, bend over and pick up that pin for me.*" She aped his manner of speaking perfectly, and if she'd not just labeled me a whore I might have laughed.

"*Bend over and pick up that pin?*" Mrs. Hooke was in a boiling rage by now. "What, so you can better rut with her? Why so subtle? Why not, *Oh, Rebecca, lie back and draw up your skirts, I can't seem to find my pintle.*"

Mr. Hooke said something about his lost pintle being *her* fault, but by then my blood so roared in my ears that I could hardly understand a word they said. I was brought back to my senses when Mrs. Hooke hurled a pewter plate through the window and into the yard.

I dashed out of the kitchen and ran until the hedges stopped me. I gazed out over the moors toward the home that I had left. I knew I could not go back, not ever, and at that moment I lamented it more than on any day before.

Once my tears had dried I went back to the house and washed out the chamber pots.

* * *

Perhaps I'd not recognized Mr. Hooke's lustfulness because of my youth, but once I heard Mrs. Hooke's words, I could not avoid it. While Richard

hovered about, hardly daring to speak to me, his father sought every opportunity to call me into the parlor or—worse—into his chamber. When he passed through the kitchen, he would trip and his hands would find their way to my hips (“*I am sorry, Rebecca! I just caught my toe on something.*”), and he would run his finger along my hand when I brought him his ale.

And so I was not surprised when Mr. Hooke, upon finding me alone as I dressed his bed, pushed me onto my back and began to pull at my skirts. He whispered fair words in my ear as his fingers worked to unlace his breeches, but his rank breath was a better sign of his spirit. When his pintle finally sprang free, I seized it with both hands and wrenched with all my strength. I imagine the Scots and perhaps even the French heard his cries, and it was nearly an hour before he came out of his room and gave me the beating that he felt I deserved.

I wish I could tell you that this early defeat put a stop to Mr. Hooke’s assaults. But like the Devil himself, Mr. Hooke would not leave me be. He continued with his caresses, though rougher now and coupled with pinches. With each one, he told me, *You belong to me, body and soul*. Except, of course, he had no interest in my soul. And so it was that some weeks later, Mr. Hooke caught me unawares. I fought him with all my strength, but in the end he used me most horribly.

From that day forward, Mr. Hooke and I engaged in a terrible game of catch-me-not, as he sought to find me alone, and I worked to ensure that it never happened. But whenever Mrs. Hooke went to York, and during one terrible week when she took Richard to visit her cousins in Halifax, where could I hide? I knew that Mr. Hooke’s assaults could get me with child, and I did my best to stave it off, but eventually my monthly courses stopped. I prayed for hours on end that the Lord would not ask me to bear this burden, that my courses would return of their own accord, but He denied me. When I missed them a second and then a third time, I stopped praying, and tried to find my own answer. I couldn’t seek out a midwife, for fear she would balk at giving me the medicines I needed, but an herborist sold me some dittany, which she said would restore me.

I drank it down, but to no effect.

To hide the child growing within me, I started adding layers to my skirts and keeping a towel on my apron. I was thin enough that such a ruse would

not work forever, but it would help for a time. Mr. Hooke must have noticed, but he carried on with his assaults just the same.

But the child was not the only thing growing within me. With every passing day, and with every foul usage that Mr. Hooke visited upon me, I felt hate growing alongside my child. There were nights that I dreamed that my child—a son, I decided—was hate incarnate and would be born into the world howling and gnashing like a beast. Other times I worried that my wrath would so mark the child that he would be born with a wolf's teeth and a wolf's appetite for blood. After a time, I noticed another change, this one in my own nature. I had always been a willful and contrary child, but now I felt my mischievousness turning to malice. I had not known this Rebecca when I was young, but welcomed her arrival, for she was well-suited for Mr. Hooke's service. Every time he visited my bedroom and every time he summoned me to his, my wrath grew stronger and purer, as a steel blade drawn from a blacksmith's forge. And each night as I lay in my bed I honed my rage a little more. Soon my weapon was ready. Now all I lacked was a time and place to use it.

The answer came to me when we visited York in the midst of the Assizes. For days a parade of country folk had been walking past the Hookes' house making their way to the city. Some had business before the court, some went to sell their wares, others went to see the hangings that would surely come. Near the end of the session we joined the crowd, and I could not help staring in amazement as we passed through the city gate, for it seemed as if the number of residents had doubled since the last time I'd been there. People thronged the streets, weaving between stalls that the city's merchants had put in front of their shops. Striped awnings rippled and snapped in the wind, filling the air with sound and color, and it seemed as if every shopkeeper in the city stood on the street crying up his wares.

With Mr. Hooke in the lead, the four of us made our way down Walmgate Bar and out the gate to St. Leonard's Green Dykes. Once there I saw why we'd come. A gallows had been built on the green and we would watch them put it to use. We arrived early enough that Mr. Hooke was able to find us a spot on the green, and we laid a blanket on the ground. I had packed dinner and—to be truthful—we spent an entirely pleasant morning together as we waited for the hangings to begin. Victualers did a fine business, as the crowd's appetite for blood was matched by its desire for a good meal. But the true profits were had by the ale-sellers who had carried their caskets out

of the city. Full of meat and drink, the crowd was in a festive mood, and from time to time they would break into ribald song.

I do not know how anyone could tell that the time for the hanging had drawn near, but while we were in the midst of eating, the crowd started to buzz and seemed to grow threefold. There could be no mistaking that the hour had come. We all stood and peered toward Walmgate Bar, and within a few minutes two carts came through. I could hardly see the prisoners, but the hangman towered above them, his head already covered by his black mask. Members of the Town Watch cleared a path through the crowd, and soon the carts reached the gallows.

I had thought that they would proceed straight to the hangings, but while the hangman busied himself tying nooses, another figure stood on the cart and began to preach to the crowd. I could hear snatches of the sermon—words such as *sin*, *damnation*, and *perdition*—but the crowd soon grew restless and shouted for the hangman to get to business. When an apple flew past the minister's head he hastily concluded his sermon and stepped down.

The first two to be hanged were notorious robbers who—according to the hangman—had committed a barbarous theft, breaking into a gentleman's house and helping themselves to his silver plate. I did not see the barbarity in mere theft, but the crowd did not seem to mind. The condemned tried to speak, but the crowd would have none of it, and they were shouted down with even more gusto than the minister had been. The hangman turned them off their ladders, and after a few minutes of jerking back and forth both were still, the life choked out of them.

The next man to be hanged was one Henry Ash. According to the hangman, he had been convicted of raping a maiden as she traveled on the highway from York to Hull. I watched in awe as the hangman dragged Ash up the ladder, set the noose around his neck, and unceremoniously pushed him off.

I cannot adequately explain the sensation I felt at the moment the rope snapped tight. The very second that Henry Ash began to die, the child within me began to live. Miraculously, Ash's first kick was entirely coincident with my child's quickening, and Ash's last moments mirrored my son's very first. But the effect was more than this. It was not just my child who was quickened at that instant, but also my plan to escape Mr. Hooke's ravishment and see justice done. If Henry Ash should die for the rape that he had committed on the highway, shouldn't John Hooke die for

the dozens he'd committed in his own home? Did the law stop at the Hookes' gate?

A few more felons were hanged that afternoon, but I paid them no mind. Rather, I told the Hookes I felt unwell and slipped out of sight. I circled through the crowd and made my way to the carts where the prisoner's bodies had been put. Henry Ash lay next to the two robbers, his face now purple, his half-lidded eyes bulging from their sockets. A well-dressed man stood next to the cart haggling with the hangman.

"I'll give you a penny more than the last time, but that is all," he insisted.

After a moment's thought, the hangman agreed, and the gentleman waved to two lads behind him. The youths stepped forward, took Ash by the arms and legs, tied him to the back of a sad-looking mule. Once their load was secure the boys led the mule toward the gate and back into the city.

I looked at the gentleman who had bought Ash's body. He read the question in my eyes.

"I am a surgeon," he said. "The court said I could anatomize him once the hangman was done with him."

"Anatomize?" I asked. I thought I knew what he meant, but it seemed too terrible to be true.

"I'll cut him open and examine him on the inside."

I continued to stare at him. Why in God's name would someone do such a thing?

"I'm exploring," he announced. "With enough hangings, I'll be able to map the muscles, sinews, and arteries of all mankind." The surgeon's voice rose with excitement as he spoke. "You cannot fathom the discoveries that we are making every day. The world's greatest anatomists—Andreas Vesalius! Helkiah Crooke!—have remade the human form. We live on the edge of a world that is new and utterly unexplored. The body is a grand thing, encompassing worlds of its own. And I will discover its secrets."

"And then what?" I asked.

The surgeon looked at me blankly. "What do you mean?"

"What will happen to his body after you've cut him up?"

"He'll be buried I suppose. I hadn't thought much of it." He looked at the sun, which now hung just above the horizon. "I must begin my work. The brain is the first organ to rot, and I should like to have it out as soon as possible."

With that, the surgeon turned on his heel and strode off in the same direction that the mule had taken Ash's body.

As awful as it sounds, my body shivered with excitement at what I'd seen and heard. I felt a terrible joy that Henry Ash, a man who was joined to my own master in his depravity, would not only hang, but be subjected to the indignity of anatomization. The anatomist said that we lived on the edge of a new world, and in an instant I felt as if I had joined him on the precipice. The only question was whether I had the courage to step into the wilderness and do battle with the savages that lay in wait.

From where I stood, the safer path seemed clear enough, but it ended in ruin. If I did nothing at all, Mrs. Hooke soon would discover that I was with child and expel me from the household. Mr. Hooke's rapes would stop, but I would nevertheless be lost, for a poor, bastard-bearing woman was the most despised creature in all England. After being whipped bloody, the very best I could hope for was to marry a doddering pauper. I then would have the pleasure of watching him die, even as my youth and beauty wasted away into nothing. Such was the fate that awaited a fortunate bastard-bearer. If I were unfortunate—and since coming to the Hookes' when had I been otherwise?—I'd find myself living on the highways. My child soon would die, and I would be subject to assaults far more vicious than Mr. Hooke's. In the end I'd face the choice between constant hunger or a short and ugly life as one of England's whores.

But I chose a bloodier and more valiant path, one which would provide a better future for me and for my unborn child. You might fault me for taking this route, or say that there were other choices. But this is how the world appeared to me as I watched the anatomist walk toward Walmgate Bar.

As if summoned by my thoughts of doing battle with savages, Mr. Hooke appeared at my side and took my arm. "There you are, Rebecca," he slurred into my ear. His speech and breath made it clear that he'd paid more than a few visits to the ale-sellers. As I felt his arms snaking about me, I forced a laugh and skipped away as lightly as I could.

"Not here," I chided him. "There are too many people."

I could see his surprise at my friendly response. To his lustful brain, now sodden with drink, *Not here* could only mean *Somewhere else*.

"Nobody here knows us." He reached behind me and seized my buttocks. "We'll find a quiet spot in the city. There are so many alleys."

“Not now,” I said. “If Mrs. Hooke should see us...” I slapped playfully at his hand, and for the first time he was pleased to let me go, for I’d never been so agreeable. And so I played the coquette all the way home, and for days after. I found such acting disagreeable, but my scheme required his trust, and this was the surest way that I could get it. If he’d not been such a fool, or so easily led by his yard, he might have wondered why I had changed my stripes. But he never did. One afternoon Mrs. Hooke sent me into the city, and I slipped into an apothecary’s shop where I bought the next piece of the puzzle. Then all I needed was the chance to act.

My opportunity came when Mrs. Hooke decided to take Richard to Halifax for a few days. She knew of a young woman who might find him agreeable, and she was eager to make a match for him. I felt a flicker of doubt at this news, but pushed it aside. A hasty marriage would present problems with my scheme, but I could not let that distant possibility blow me off course.

The night before Mrs. Hooke and Richard were to leave, I lay in bed and wondered at what I was about to do. *Murder*. I turned the word over on my tongue and whispered it aloud. But was it really murder? Henry Ash had been hanged for the same crime Mr. Hooke had committed. And for all I knew Ash had only done it once. How many times had Mr. Hooke raped me? *No*, I decided. *This is no murder. He has earned his fate. He is simply going to his death without the trouble of a trial. And what man would argue for his innocence?* Setting aside *murder*, I tried other words: *justice*, *retribution*, and *righteousness*. They sounded better when I whispered them to myself. They sounded right.

Almost before Mrs. Hook and Richard had passed out of sight, Mr. Hooke had his hands on me. Once again I slipped away.

“Why so fast?” The sound of my laugh grated on my ears. “We have days, if not a week.”

“But my master will not wait so long,” Mr. Hooke protested, grabbing at himself.

“Let us have some wine,” I said as I dashed to the kitchen. “You go to your chamber and I’ll come up.”

From the sound of his footsteps, I judged Mr. Hooke had climbed the stairs at a full run. I took my time preparing his wine, making sure that the concoction was entirely mixed. He had just a sip before leaping upon me. I clamped my teeth together, and told myself that I had survived worse, and

this would be the very last time I'd suffer in such a fashion. Once Mr. Hooke had finished, he reached for his glass and drank it at a draught.

I watched his face closely, wondering when the signs of what I'd done would appear. He'd just closed his eyes—perhaps he was falling asleep—when the pain gripped him. He rolled onto his side, grasped his belly, and vomited onto the floor.

“Good lord, what is wrong?” I leaped to my feet and circled the bed so I could take his hand. “Are you unwell?”

“Oh God, my guts,” he moaned. “What is happening?”

“Lie back,” I told him. He did and for a moment the pain seemed to ease. For the next hour or so I sat with him, wondering if I'd used enough poison to kill him. By evening he seemed to be recovering, so I gave him another dram, and the next morning he was cold as a stone.

As I gazed at his body, my only regret was that I could not have him anatomized.

* * *

My first task was to convince the neighbors that he'd died of a sudden stroke. To accomplish this, I washed and dressed his body, and then scrubbed the chamber floor for hours. It seemed that the poison I'd used had caused him to bleed into his stomach and then he'd vomited up the blood. The consequent mess had been something to behold. But by the time I dragged him to the barn and lay him in the straw, who could deny my claim?

Well, you can imagine the scene when Mrs. Hooke and Richard returned from Halifax. They had missed the funeral, of course, and for a woman who had been cuckolded, Mrs. Hooke played the grieving widow perfectly.

Richard was heartsick as well, and I could understand. For all the wrong he'd done to me, Mr. Hooke had shown his son nothing but love. I even felt a moment's guilt when I saw Richard's tears. I told myself that Mr. Hooke would have died eventually, and that Richard's grief was no greater because his father had died this week rather than next, or because I had murdered him. Dead was dead.

And more important, with Mr. Hooke safely in the ground, I could begin the next part of my plan.

II

A few days after his return from Halifax, I saw Richard standing at the edge of the hay croft south of the house. He gazed out at the horizon, lost in his thoughts. I came upon him unawares and took his hand in mine. He jumped, but did not take his hand away.

“You miss him, don’t you,” I said.

That was all it took. Moments later, he was sobbing like a child. I put my arms around him and let him weep. When his tears had stopped, I put my lips to his. After a moment, I led him to a spot behind the hedge where none would see us.

Some might cast stones at me for all that followed. And I will admit that my scheme did not proceed as I’d hoped. My own suffering is testament to that. At the outset, my intention had never been to kill anyone besides Mr. Hooke, and to this day I would swear that I never meant to harm Richard. Despite his doltishness, he was a kind boy, utterly without his father’s cruelty. If all had gone to plan, we would have married and I would have had a quiet, uneventful life. That was all I wanted. The mistake I made was in misjudging Mrs. Hooke entirely. I would lay the blame for all that followed at her door.

A few weeks after I lay with Richard for the first time, I took him by the hand and led him back to the croft.

“Richard, I must tell you something. I am with child.”

He took my hand and put it to his lips. “You are?” he asked in wonder.

“Aye,” I said. “What will we do?”

“We will marry,” he said without a moment’s hesitation. “We will tell my mother and we will marry. If we tell her we were betrothed before we lay together none would call our child a bastard. It is but a small lie and for the best.”

“Oh, Richard,” I cried out and took him in my arms. My relief and happiness both were genuine, for this—I thought—had been the one moment at which things might go wrong. If Richard had refused to marry me, all would have been lost.

We held hands as we walked back to the house so we could tell his mother of our betrothal and my pregnancy.

“Let me tell her alone,” Richard said. “Then I will send for you.”

I agreed, of course, and I could see no reason why she would not allow us to marry. The Hookes were not of any particular importance even among their neighbors, and Richard would hardly have been the first lad to marry his parents’ maidservant. I waited in the kitchen while Richard sought his mother. And *that* is when my scheme began to go awry.

Within moments I knew that we had misjudged her state, for the howling that echoed through the house could in no wise be confused with joy. I heard Mrs. Hooke’s footsteps as she tore through the parlor, and steeled myself for the clash that would follow.

When she entered the kitchen, I gasped aloud, for I’d never seen her—or anyone else for that matter—in such a furious humor. Her eyes bulged and rolled in their sockets, and her face had turned a most unnatural crimson.

“You common drab,” she hissed as she strode toward me. She seized a fire-shovel and raised it over her head like an executioner’s axe. “Do you think I’d let this pass? Do you think I’d let Richard marry his own father’s whore?” Drops of spittle flew from her mouth as she shouted and waved the shovel menacingly.

Not knowing what else I could do, I dropped to my knees before her.

“Please,” I cried. “Have mercy on me. I did nothing wrong.”

I do not know if she was struck by my audacity, but for some reason—and for the first time since I’d come to her house—Mrs. Hooke hesitated before striking me. She lowered the shovel and peered into my eyes, as if she were hoping to discern the nature of my soul.

And perhaps she succeeded, for without another word she swung the shovel at my head. I ducked, but too late, and she caught me above the ear. I fell to the ground and curled into a ball, wrapping my arms around my belly to protect my child. I do not know how many times she struck me—a dozen perhaps?—but in the end the bruises so overlapped they could not be counted. After a time I became aware of someone shouting, and realized that the beating had stopped. I looked up and saw that Richard had wrested the shovel from his mother’s hand and was pushing her away from me. I tried to stand, but the pain shot through me like lightning and I resolved to lay there for a bit longer. I closed my eyes and all became darkness.

When I awoke I found that it was night and someone had put me in my bed. For a time I lay there, not daring to move. My body felt as if it had been set alight, and I knew that if I tried to stand I would fail. I closed my eyes again and, despite the pain, fell back into the abyss.

* * *

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

My eyes snapped open and in an instant I was as awake as I’d ever been. Mrs. Hooke stood over me, staring into my face with a cold fury.

“You seduced my husband into your bed, and when you wearied of his attention, you poisoned him.”

“I never would.”

Mrs. Hooke raised her hand, and I flinched. Pain fired through my body and I cried out despite myself.

“Do not lie,” she hissed. “I know the kind of man my husband was. He could no more resist your temptations than Adam could resist Eve’s. I know that you’ve been meddling with him for months, and I know that the child in your belly is his, not Richard’s.”

Mrs. Hooke laughed at the surprised look on my face.

“Richard may be a fool,” she said. “But I am not. He told me when you lay together, and you have been with child for far longer than that.”

I dared not speak.

“I have found a neighbor girl and she will care for you until you are able to walk,” she continued. “As soon as you can, you will leave my home and you will never return. If you ever speak to Richard again, if I ever see you again, I will finish the beating I started yesterday.” Without waiting for a response she left my room.

I lay in the bed for a full week. Twice a day a girl brought me broth, ale, and bread, but she refused to speak to me. And so it was that I had endless hours to consider what had gone wrong with my plan, and to meditate upon all the wrongs that Mrs. Hooke had visited on me. How long had she known that Mr. Hooke had been using me so barbarously? And why had she allowed it to continue? To my surprise, the fury that I’d felt toward Mr. Hooke—fury which I thought had died with him—flared back to life like the embers in a well-banked fire. But as I lay there in bed, I knew that such thoughts were of no use. I could not take revenge on Mrs. Hooke without risking my own life, and even a simple lad such as Richard would become

suspicious if *both* his parents died in my presence. So the following week I gathered my few belongings and started for York. Where else could I go?

* * *

Because it was not yet obvious that I was with child, I had no trouble finding employment. A washer-woman in St. Wilfred's parish took me in, and in exchange for food and a bed I helped her in her work. I thanked the Lord that even as my belly grew the weather turned cold, and I could wear a coat to hide my condition without attracting notice. Even my new mistress did not know.

But as the weeks passed, I knew that I would soon have to make a decision about my travail. I did not want to bear the child alone, but if I sought out a midwife, she would see me whipped for bastardy, and I refused to suffer yet again for Mr. Hooke's crimes. I did my best to find a woman who might aid me in my labor without summoning the churchwardens, but a single woman—especially one whose belly was growing by the day—had to be careful when asking such questions.

In the end I tarried too long, and early one Saturday morning I felt the first pangs of my travail. I tried to quiet myself, but could not help crying out. My mistress burst into my room, and knew in an instant what was happening.

"What, a whore in my home?" she snarled. In two steps she had crossed the room and seized me by my hair. She dragged me into the street and started crying for her neighbors. Within seconds I found myself surrounded by the parish matrons, all poking and pinching at me, calling me *whore*, *putain*, *trug*, and *foul slattern*.

One matron, a barrel-chested woman who'd married a butcher—stepped forward and seized me by the ear.

"We must see her out of the parish before she brings her bastard into the world," she cried. "I'll not support such a strumpet's child."

The other women cried out in agreement, and I found myself being pushed, pulled, and dragged toward the parish's boundary with St. Helen's. I might have given birth there, but with all the commotion, the women of St. Helen's realized what was happening and rose up in defense of their parish.

I do not know how many neighborhoods and parishes I passed through on that day, pushed one way, pulled another, pinched purple in between.

One group of women drove me into their neighbors' church and told me to stay there. I tried to do so, but another group dragged me out and threatened to throw me in the river if I did not leave their parish.

As horribly as I was abused on that day, the most terrible moment came when I realized how typical Mr. and Mrs. Hooke were in their cruelty. I had heard the preachers say that man was born in sin, and remained sinful to his marrow. Now I had seen such depravity with my own eyes and felt it in my bones. Now I knew that my suffering at the Hookes' hands was not at all unusual, nor was it the result of their peculiar evil. Rather it was in perfect tune with the rest of the world. The abuse of innocent girls like me lay at the heart of *all* of the city's "honorable" folk. I just had not seen it until that afternoon.

On that day, my belief in goodness and charity turned to ash, burned by the fire that the Hookes had set and that the women of York stoked through their deliberate and wanton viciousness. These women, so loving toward their own, knew nothing of true Christianity, and cared nothing for the poor and miserable. The Lord said that on Judgment Day those who showed no mercy would receive no mercy. I resolved that if I had the chance, I would help Him in taking His vengeance on this unsparing mob.

By the time I became aware of the world around me, I had somehow found my way to the River Foss. The women pushed me across the bridge and then stood in the street daring me to return. I dragged myself out of the street, sat against the side of a building and, for the first time that day, allowed myself to cry.

I was still weeping when someone took my arms and lifted me to my feet. I resigned myself to more taunts, kicks, and punches, but I was led away without any abuse at all. The woman who had helped me stand seemed no different from those who had driven me from parish to parish, but instead of taking me out of the city she took me to her home. Once there she put me in a bed, and ordered her maid to bring me a drink of ale and spices.

"How long have you been in travail?" she asked.

"Since this morning," I replied.

"And are the pains close together?"

"Not yet," I said. "An hour or more."

"From the way the harridans were treating you, I take it you are a single-woman?"

I nodded.

“I’ll care for you now, but you’ll have to tell me who the father is. If you tell me, I’ll see that he maintains both you and your child. If you don’t tell me, you’ll have to birth the child by yourself.” She produced a bottle of oil and put some on her hands. I realized that she must be a midwife.

“Lie back so I can examine you,” she said.

I did as I was told, and used the time to gather my thoughts. Telling the truth about my child’s father would do me no good at all, for Mr. Hooke was in no position to support his son. The midwife looked at me and raised her eyebrow. I turned away and said nothing.

“Your matrix is still closed,” she announced. “You’ll be in travail for some hours still. Is this your first child?”

“Yes, my lady,” I said.

The woman’s laugh was loud and warm. “I’m no gentlewoman,” she said. “You can call me Mrs. Bairstow.”

“Yes, Mrs. Bairstow,” I said.

“Good. Now finish your caudle, and I’ll have my maid look to those cuts and bruises. None seem too serious, but they could use cleaning.”

For the first time in months—perhaps for the first time since I left home—I felt safe. I closed my eyes and slept, waking once for a labor pang, but quickly finding my way back to sleep.

I awoke from dreams I could not remember to the sound of pounding in the distance. I climbed out of bed and opened the door just a crack. From my room I could see Mrs. Bairstow standing at the front door, her back to me.

“We’ll not support some other parish’s bastard,” a woman shouted. “You must give her to us so we can drive her out.” I heard a chorus of women in the background agreeing to these demands.

“Remember your place, Sarah Cooper.” Mrs. Bairstow’s voice lacked all the warmth I’d heard when she spoke to me. It sounded like an unsheathed dagger. “You’ll not meddle between me and one of my mothers, single or not.”

“I’ll be back with more women,” Sarah Cooper said.

“You have six with you now, but you think twelve will convince me? I’ll say the same thing to them as I’m saying to you, you wrinkled shrew. Whatever you say or do, I am a midwife and I’ll care for this woman. You

should go on your way. Ruin someone else's day." Without waiting for a response, Mrs. Bairstow slammed the door and dropped the bar into place.

I eased my door closed and climbed back into bed. A few moments later, Mrs. Bairstow returned and checked my matrix again.

"You're coming along slowly, but well enough," she said. "Will you tell me who the father is? You will tell me eventually, or I'll have to turn you out. The street is no place for a woman to give birth."

I remained silent and avoided her gaze.

"Fair enough, but you should remember: There are no secrets from me," she said. "Not yours or anyone else's. And you'll change your mind. Single-women always do. I'll return in a bit."

I lay back and gazed out the window at the small courtyard that lay behind Mrs. Bairstow's house. Dreams and possibilities flooded my mind. A half-dozen matrons—the "honorable" women of the parish—had demanded my head, and Mrs. Bairstow had sent them away with a few harsh words. She did not fear her neighbors and she did as she pleased. What power that was! I tried to imagine what having such authority meant, and my mind reeled. For all my life I'd been someone's something: my father's daughter, Mr. Hooke's secret prey, Mrs. Hooke's victim, and very nearly Richard Hooke's wife. But Mrs. Bairstow was no man's anything. *She* told people what to do. *She* knew her neighbor's secrets. Was it possible I could gain such power? If I did, none would ever dare challenge me. I did not know how I could attain such lofty heights, but knew that someday I would do so.

As the afternoon wore on, I turned to the question of who I would name as my child's father. I could not name Mr. Hooke, for it would bring me nothing but grief. And if I said Richard was the father, Mrs. Hooke would gainsay my claim, and she could prove me a liar. I could name another man in the Hookes' neighborhood, of course, for some were wealthy enough to afford a child, but I refused that path as well. I wanted more for my son and for myself than the mere pennies that such men would pay. Suddenly the answer to my problems came to me in its terrible simplicity. I ran from it as best I could, but as night fell it became clear that I had but one bloody and brutal path before me. So I took it.

When midnight came, so too did my child. The birthing pangs were a wonder I cannot begin to describe. But the strength with which my child struggled to be born gave me hope beyond measure. Surely so mighty a lad would not fall into so poor a life as I had endured. Mrs. Bairstow was very

loving and treated me kindly until the moment that she judged that my travail had reached its height.

“Rebecca, you must tell me who the father of your child is,” she demanded. “If you will not tell me, I will put you into the alley and you’ll give birth alone.” She reached up and pinched my breast to accent her point. I gasped at the pain, but refused to speak a word. She pressed me further and again, as the pain grew worse. But I still refused to speak the father’s name.

When Mrs. Bairstow’s fury had reached its limit, she turned to her maid.

“Get her up,” she ordered. “We’ll see her out. If she wishes to have this child in the filth of a city street it is her choice.”

When the two women had me by the arms I relented. “I’ll tell you!” I cried. “Please don’t send me away.”

Mrs. Bairstow stared into my eyes, clearly unconvinced.

“I’ll tell you.” And I told her the name of the man I would have as my child’s father.

“Rebecca, you must father this child rightly,” Mrs. Bairstow insisted. “Travail is a perilous time, and you might die. Do not make your final words a lie. The Lord will be a harsh judge if you so mock Him.”

“I did not lie. I swear he is the father.”

Mrs. Bairstow asked me a few more times, and on each occasion I gave her the same answer. Eventually I must have satisfied her, for she settled into the work of delivering my child. When my son finally came shouting and bawling into the world, I held him in my arms and gave him my breast. When I gazed into his beautiful face as he fed, I found myself overcome with a love more terrible and strong than anything I had felt in my life. He had been born in wrath, but what would I not do for this child? In that moment I could not understand why the choice that I had made that afternoon had seemed so difficult. Now that I held him in my arms, the venture—however dangerous—seemed like the only thing to do.

III

After giving birth I stayed at Mrs. Bairstow's for my lying-in. I paid for the privilege, of course, but for all that she was very kind and lamented the fact that I would soon be whipped for my bastardy. I knew that—one way or another—she was wrong, but said nothing. For nearly a month I lay in bed with James at my side, puzzling over my scheme and trying to find any flaws. When I believed that nothing could go wrong, I wrote a letter and sent for a boy to deliver it. And so the final act of my play began.

The next morning the boy brought me the answer for which I'd prayed, and I took my leave of Mrs. Bairstow.

"I will repay you for your help," I told her. "Someday I will."

"See that you take care of little James," she said as she embraced me.

I nodded, and started walking toward the Minster's towers. Mrs. Bairstow had given me the name of a woman who might help me care for James and, though I made some wrong turns along the way, I soon found her. She demanded three pennies per week, four if I wanted her to nurse the child. Once we were in terms, I gave James the breast one more time and set out on my way.

That evening, just before sunset, I slipped out the gate and began the walk to the Hookes'. I heard the cries of the Town Watch and the sounds of the gate crashing closed behind me and I prayed that I would not be in chains the next time I passed through.

The sun was well down by the time the Hookes' house came into view. Broken clouds covered the moon, and I moved from shadow to shadow as I crossed the yard. The Hookes had no near neighbors, so I was not afraid of discovery, but saw no sense in taking chances. I crept first to the barn, and then to the window of the room where I had once slept. I tapped gently. When I received no response, I said a prayer and tapped again. After a moment the window opened and a face appeared. She was a young woman, not older than me.

"Please, can you let me in for a moment?" I begged. "I used to be Mrs. Hooke's servant. I must speak with you."

The girl looked at me uncertainly.

"I mean you no harm," I said. "Please."

The girl nodded. "I'll open the kitchen door."

"Thank you," I breathed.

I circled behind the house toward the kitchen, and waited for the maid. She opened the kitchen door a few inches and peered out.

"Come outside, just for a moment," I said. "Please."

When she did, I raised the hammer I'd found in the barn and struck her in the head with all my strength. She dropped like she'd been shot, and lay on the ground shaking and shivering in a most unnatural manner. I aimed carefully and struck her again. After that she was still. When sorrow welled up within me, I recalled all the wrongs I had suffered at the Hooke's hands, and at the hands of York's matrons, and my doubts ebbed away.

I left the poor girl where she lay, and slipped into the house. I eased open Mrs. Hooke's door, crossing to her bed without a sound. Her eyes flashed open the moment before the hammer struck her forehead. She cried out once, but I did not worry that anyone would hear her, for the maid was dead and I knew Richard was not home. My letter had seen to that. I hit her more times than I had the maidservant, in part out of malice, but also to be sure that she was dead. When I'd had my fill of that bloody work, I dropped the hammer next to her head. I would not need it again.

Then I began to hurry, for I did not know how long Richard would wait for me, and our secret meeting place was too close to the house for my comfort.

I opened the chest where Mrs. Hooke hid her ready money and took the leather sack of coins. On my way to the kitchen I closed the maid's door and Mrs. Hooke's. The longer my deeds remained secret the better. Once I was outside I began the most difficult stage of my scheme.

After wrapping the girl's head in order to keep the blood off me, I hoisted her onto my back and carried her to the road. If anyone had seen me I surely would have been hanged, but God was with me that night. It took me nearly an hour of searching, but eventually I found a ravine deep enough to suit me. I wrapped the cord from Mrs. Hooke's money bag around the maid's wrist, and removed the cloth I'd put on her head. I said a prayer of thanks that the darkness hid the damage the hammer had done. I did not regret my choice, but that did not mean I wished to revel in it. Finally, I rolled her body over the edge and prayed that she would not fall into the stream and

be carried away. For a moment I considered climbing down to ensure that all had gone as planned, but quickly discarded the idea. If I found myself unable to climb back up, I'd have a difficult time explaining myself when the searchers found me.

I struck out to the south, knowing that I would eventually reach the York road. As I walked, I allowed my mind to focus on the next part of my play. My performance would have to rival any found on London's stage, or I surely would be hanged. When I reached the suburbs closest to Bootham Bar, I found a barn and nestled into the hay to await sunrise and the opening of the city gates. Within minutes I was asleep.

When the cock-crow awoke me, I sprang to my feet. I could no more afford to be found in that barn than at the bottom of the gullet where I'd put the maid's body. By the time the sun rose, I had hidden myself in a copse of trees from which I could see the road into York. Within an hour I saw carts moving in and out of the city and knew the curtain had risen on my final scene.

I arrived at the Hookes' house in perfect time. Even from a distance I could see the yard had become a beehive, as dozens of friends and neighbors busied themselves at some great task. None paid me any mind when I slipped through the gate and mixed in with the crowd.

I sought out Mary Hopkins, a neighbor's maid I had known during my months with the Hookes, and asked her what had happened.

"Murder," Mary breathed softly. "Sairy has murdered Mrs. Hooke and run off!"

"What?" I cried. "Mrs. Hooke is dead? Who is Sairy?"

"She was their new maidservant," Mary replied. "She came to Mrs. Hooke soon after you left."

"And they have taken Sairy?" I asked. "Has she confessed?"

"They haven't found her yet, but they've raised a hue and cry," Mary said. "A man went to the city to watch the gate. The others are about to begin their search of the roads and countryside." She gestured toward a group of men, some on horse, some on foot, who were preparing to depart.

"How is Richard? Have you seen him?" I asked.

"Mad with grief, as you'd imagine. He lost both his parents in a few months!"

"Poor lad," I said. "Poor lad."

I was careful to bide my time, remaining in the yard until Richard came outside and saw me. Grief creased his face as soon as I caught his eye, and he motioned for me to meet him inside. I found him in the kitchen and he drew me into my old room.

“Thank God you are here,” he cried out as soon as we closed the door. “What happened? Where were you last night? We were to meet!”

“I am sorry, my love.” I took his hands in mine. “I did not reach the gate until the guards had closed it, so I could not leave the city until this morning. I came as soon as they opened, only to discover ... this. Is it true what they are saying? That Sairy–?”

“Aye,” Richard said. “She killed my mother as she slept, and fled with all our ready cash.” Richard paused as if he’d had a terrible revelation. “Thank the Lord you did not see her on the road! She might have killed you as well, and then where would I be?” He sat on the bed and wept.

I sat next to him and put my arms around his shoulders. He buried his face in my neck and began to sob in earnest.

When his tears had stopped, I took his face in my hands.

“Richard,” I said. “This is far from the best time to tell you this, but I have some happier news.”

He looked at me for a moment and then down at my belly.

“The child!” he cried. “You have given birth?”

“You have a son,” I replied. “I left him with a nurse in the city. He is as strong a bairn as you have ever seen.”

Richard threw his arms around me, and I counted myself the luckiest woman in England that he’d been born with dull wits and a kind heart. He could not fathom that he was not James’s father, and I had no doubt that he would reject any suggestions to the contrary. Here was a man I could marry without fear.

Richard and I went into the yard and awaited news of the search for Sairy. As sunset approached, a rider crested a hill and raced toward us. He came from the north, where I’d left Sairy’s body. I said a prayer that they had discovered her.

“Richard,” the man called out, even as he dismounted. “They have found the maid.”

“Thank God,” Richard cried. “And she is taken?”

“She is taken to York,” he replied. “At least her body is.”

“She is dead?” I asked.

“Matthew Parker found her in a streambed near one of his crofts. She’d fallen down the gullet in the dark. She hit her head on a stone and drowned.” He reached into the sumpter on the back of his horse and produced the bag of coins I’d stolen the night before. “She still had your money with her.”

Richard took the bag and stared about the yard in wonder. I held my breath for what seemed an eternity, not daring to believe that my scheme had come together so perfectly. When Richard embraced me, I knew that I had angled him well and now he was mine.

I stayed that night with Richard—in my old bed, of course—and the next morning we sent for James. The smile on Richard’s face when he saw the boy was brighter than a thousand suns, and warmed me to my marrow. He would be a good father, better than his own at least.

Soon after—once we’d buried his mother, of course—Richard and I were married, and I convinced him to rent his lands and house and move into York. We lived poorly for a time, but I had no doubt that if I ruled him well, he would thrive in trade. After all I had done to make him my husband, making him rich would be nothing at all.

Over the years that followed, I slowly built our estate. I began by storing grain when it was plentiful and selling it when it was dear. Richard objected on Christian grounds, but I would not allow his quibbling to distract me from my goal. With the money from this trade, we bought more land and I entered the clothing trade, buying and selling fine linen and silks. Sweet, stupid Richard had no head for money, but knew enough to listen to me, and that was all I wanted.

Unfortunately, while we proved fruitful in business, within a year it became clear—to me, at least—that Richard could not father a child. We both hoped to surround ourselves with children, and tried all the remedies we could find, but to no avail. Finally, at Richard’s urging, I went to Fossgate parish and sought out Mrs. Bairstow. Perhaps the midwife who had delivered me of James could offer some help.

I found her living in the same house where I’d travailed. Without the bruises and in a much finer dress than the last time I’d come, she hardly recognized me.

“Well, I’m glad you convinced the child’s father to marry you,” she said. “And the two of you seem to be doing very well.”

“Richard is a good man and we are happy,” I said. “But I do not think that he can father a child.”

It did not take Mrs. Bairstow long to recognize the meaning of my words.

“You cannot tell anyone that my husband is not James’s father,” I said. “I did nothing wrong, but he would hate me all the same.”

“Who is the true father?” Mrs. Bairstow asked. “Tell me what happened.”

“My husband’s father raped me when I was in service. The boy is my husband’s half brother.”

Even so subtle a woman as Mrs. Bairstow could not hide her shock at this news, but she quickly recovered herself.

“I am sorry for that,” she said. “Where is he now?”

“The father?” I asked. “Dead of a stroke some years ago.”

Mrs. Bairstow stared at me for a time, considering her decision carefully.

“Tell your husband that the violence of James’s birth deformed your matrix,” she said. “That is why his seed can find no purchase.”

I bowed my head in thanks. “You will tell nobody?”

“I’m as discreet a midwife as you’ll find,” Mrs. Bairstow replied. “You would be surprised at the secrets I am asked to keep.”

In an instant, my memory returned to the day of my travail, when she had chased away an angry crowd of women with nothing more than a few choice words.

“That is why the women obey you,” I said. “You know their secrets.”

Mrs. Bairstow laughed. “Aye, that’s the key. I know who has the French Pox, who killed their unborn children with strong drink, who are the good mothers, and who are the bad. There’s little I *don’t* know about the women of Fossgate parish.”

“You are a good woman,” I told her. *And a fool for keeping the confidence of such harpies. If you made real use of this power, your neighbors would fear you more than God Himself.*

“It is something I have always done,” she replied.

“Mrs. Bairstow,” I said. “There is one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“After all the kindness you have shown me, and after all you have done for your neighbors, I should very much like to follow your path. The women of York deserve more loving care than you can give alone. Would you take me on as your deputy?”

Mrs. Bairstow smiled, and for the barest of moments I regretted the lie. But I reminded myself that the women of York deserved nothing from me save the sharp end of an arrow. And after all I'd done to make Richard mine and to secure myself from poverty and want, what difference could one more lie make?

Turn the page for a first look at
The Harlot's Tale
the second book in the Bridget Hodgson series

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Chapter 1

“Jane! Listen to me, Jane! Can you hear me?”

With visible effort, Jane Moore lifted her head from the pillow. Sweat streamed from her brow and tears trickled down her cheeks. Time was short and she had little left to give. She tried to focus on my face, tried to listen to me, but after a moment her eyes rolled up and her head dropped to the pillow.

“Christ almighty,” I said. “Fetch some pepper; we’ve got to bring her back to us.” One of the women dashed away and returned with a small dish. I took a pinch of pepper and forced it up Jane’s nose. Her eyes flew open and she cried out in surprise.

“Jane, look at me,” I said. Her gaze was sharper than it had been since I’d arrived nearly twelve hours before. I thanked the Lord for giving her this moment of strength, but I also knew that He would not give her another chance. I cupped her face in my hands and looked into her eyes. “Jane, the baby is growing weak. If he is going to live, if *you* are going to live, he must be born soon.”

Fear flashed in her eyes, but then it was gone. She breathed deeply and nodded.

“Good,” I said, and returned to my work.

The child who had seemed so weak when Jane was in travail came squalling into the world just before the Minster bells called the faithful to the afternoon service. Jane collapsed into her gossips’ arms, sobbing with exhaustion and relief. I left the infant to Martha Hawkins, my deputy midwife, and slipped out of the room to tell Jane’s husband what had happened.

John Moore leaped from his chair as soon as I entered the parlor. His haggard face told me that the concern he felt for his wife ran deep into his bones. She was a lucky woman to have found such a husband. “Lady Hodgson,” he said, and stopped, his mouth open but empty of words. I knew from experience that he feared the worst and dared not hope for the best. Through my own exhaustion I mustered a smile, and his face relaxed.

“Oh, thank God!” he cried. “My Jane is well?” I nodded. “And the baby?” he asked. “I heard a cry, but then nothing.”

“They are tired, but both are fine,” I said. “You should wait a moment before going in. My deputy is wrapping the child and then he must suck. Once he has had his fill, you can hold him.”

A sound somewhere between laughter and tears bubbled up from John’s throat, and I could see two days of fear drain from his body.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said. “Jane asked me to send for you earlier, but Mrs. Pike refused to have you in. She said she did not need your help to deliver the child. I should have insisted.”

“Mary Pike is a capable midwife,” I said carefully. This was not always the case, but I could not wantonly slander one of my sisters, however prideful. “It is hard for any of us to admit when a task overwhelms us. She had been with your wife for nearly two days and fatigue fogged her mind. I have had the same experience.”

“What if I had waited to call you?” he asked. The lines of his face betrayed the guilt he felt at having placed his wife and child in peril. “What would have happened to my Jane?”

I knew the answer that was true, and I knew the answer that he needed to hear. I chose the latter. “Had I not come, the Lord’s will still would have been done, and Mrs. Pike would have delivered your wife and child safely.” He may have looked more relieved at this news than when I had told him that Jane and the child had survived, but I could not fault him for that. I knew many parents who blamed themselves when their children died, and it was a terrible burden. Some nights I was haunted by the memory of my own lost little ones, and by the nagging question of whether I might somehow have saved them.

Stepping out of the Moores’ home felt more like entering a well than a courtyard. Buildings surrounded Martha and me on four sides, and the sky was reduced to a bright blue square some fifty feet above. The saving grace was that the courtyard seemed cool compared to the rest of York. Martha and I ducked through the low passage that led to one of the narrow streets that wound their way through the city with neither rhyme nor reason. Among the most difficult tasks for a city midwife was finding her clients in the warren of streets, as the close-built houses hid the city’s landmarks. This, combined with the mad twists and turns of York’s alleys, meant that

even longtime residents could find themselves in unintended and—as Martha and I had discovered to our peril—dangerous neighborhoods.

Martha and I found our way from a side street on to High Petergate, and there we were met by the full fury of the August sun. For the last month, York had suffered from a heat more merciless than anyone could remember. The oldest among us said that a blast such as this had come in the time of Queen Elizabeth, but even they agreed that it had not lasted so long. Cowherds lamented that the grass outside the city walls had turned brown and that their animals would soon starve, while brewers worried that without rain their wells would run dry. I knew not what the Lord meant by sending this terrible summer season, but I felt quite sure that every sermon preached in the city that day would ask the question, and that every minister would have an answer.

Petergate was wider than most of the city's avenues, and it usually would be thronged with merchants and travelers flowing through the gate at Bootham Bar and into the heart of the city. On market days, walkers would have to compete with merchants, market women, horses, carts, pigs, and kine. But because it was the Sabbath and the afternoon service had not yet ended, Martha and I had the street to ourselves, save a few slow-moving pigs and the occasional lad rushing to the afternoon service in the fond hope of avoiding a whipping by his master. Before the city had fallen into Parliament's hands, not all of its residents were so careful to attend services at both ends of the day, but our new Puritan masters made a point of punishing those who violated the Lord's Day. Even as godly preachers roared against plays, dancing, and other sinful recreations, the constables and beadles stormed into alehouses to harry their inhabitants to church. At long last the Puritan dream of uniting the Word of God and the Sword of Justice had come true.

Martha and I fell into our habit of discussing the birth and the lessons it could teach her. She had come into my service just over a year before and—in addition to saving my life on more than one occasion—had proven instrumental in solving a series of murders. Thanks to her quick mind and strength of character, I took her on as my deputy as well as my maidservant and began to train her in the mysteries of childbirth. For nearly a year, we had been lucky; none of the labors she'd attended as my deputy had been difficult or dangerous. But I could tell that Jane Moore's brush with death had shaken Martha, for rather than talking exuberantly of how Jane's labor

had compared to others, and pushing me to reveal more secrets of the trade, she kept her eyes fastened on the street before her.

“What would we have done if the child hadn’t come when he did?” Though the street was quiet, I could barely hear her words.

“The child did come,” I said. “That is what matters.”

“No, it isn’t,” she insisted. “I need to know what to do if everything I try fails. What then? What haven’t you told me?”

I had no ready answer, and no desire to tell her the horrible truth. If the child had not come on his own accord, we would have had to put aside his life and dedicate ourselves to saving his mother whatever the cost. “It is not something we should discuss so soon after the birth,” I said at last. “You must be able to think clearly, without worrying over ‘what if’ or ‘what might have been.’ Mother and child were saved, and for today that is enough.”

“All right,” she said. “How will you handle Midwife Pike? She was none too happy when you arrived, and she left in a fury like I’ve not seen in some time.”

“In all but the most ordinary cases she is unfit to deliver a mare,” I replied. I remained aghast at the care Jane had received at her hands. “But you must never say so aloud.”

“What?” Martha cried. “She didn’t even know the child had come shoulders first, and she screamed at Jane while gossips dragged her from the room! Surely we must do something.”

“We will let the gossips tell tales of her inadequacy. That will be enough. However, you and I must soothe her anger as best we can. Today I will send her a note of thanks.” Martha started to object, but I continued. “And when you are in the shops, you will tell the wives that Mrs. Pike prepared the way for the child’s birth, and allowed me to step in when she grew tired.”

“Why in God’s name would I do that? Why would you? You yourself said she is unfit to be a midwife.”

“And the gossips saw that,” I replied patiently. “Soon enough all York will know of her carriage, and mothers will stop calling her to their bedside. She will have a license to practice midwifery, but no mothers to practice upon, all without our uttering a word. There is no sense in angering a neighbor needlessly.” Martha nodded grudgingly, and I knew she would do what I’d asked. In the year we’d been together we had learned to trust each other, both in the delivery room and out.

Even before we reached Stonegate, the street that would take us home, I could tell something ahead was amiss. The crowds had flowed out of St. Martin's church, but rather than continuing on their way, they had stopped and surrounded a man preaching in the street. While some listened intently, to my ears he sounded like a lunatic.

"In the midst of our nation's divisions, distractions, and desolations, the Lord our God has seen fit to smite us with war, with fire, with pestilence, and now with a terrible and torturing heat. The crying sin of our nation, the door through which Satan has entered our realm, is the profaning of the Sabbath with piping, with dancing, with dicing, and with other such devilish pastimes!"

The man wore all black with a white collar draped across his shoulders; the collar was plain, of course—such a one as he would view lace as mere frivolity. He held a large Bible with gilded edges over his head, and periodically jabbed it with his finger to emphasize a particular point. He faced away from us as we approached, but his voice was loud enough that we could hear him perfectly.

"Some of you will object to my words," he thundered. "You will say, 'We have spent part of the day in the House of the Lord; surely we should make merry in the afternoon. Why should we not dance? It is only good neighborliness.' But to you I say, why do you go straight out of God's church and into the devil's? Did the Lord say unto Moses, '*Part* of the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord'? Did he say, 'Do what you will in the afternoon'? Or, 'Thou shalt spend the Sabbath in the alehouse'?"

Martha tittered at the image of Moses on an alehouse bench, and the preacher whirled around to find the miscreant. Despite his age—I would have guessed him to be near fifty—he moved with the agility of a younger man, and seemed ready to pounce on whomever had the temerity to laugh at his sermon. He stared into the crowd with such intensity, it took me a moment to notice the milky white pearl within one of his eyes; the man was half-blind.

"Oh, you may laugh now," he roared into the crowd. "But your screams will echo through the ages when the Lord comes to punish you for your sins. You must repent, and you must keep the Sabbath holy, for the Lord demands it!"

I took Martha's arm and gently steered her through the crowd toward home. Though I did not think the preacher had noticed me or Martha out of

all those in the crowd, I could not help feeling that he watched us as we slipped away.

“Your brother-in-law will be pleased with the preaching that the rebellion has brought to York,” Martha said disparagingly.

I would never have given voice to such thoughts, but I could not disagree with her sentiment. While the war between King and Parliament raged on to the south, York had been at peace ever since the rebel armies took the city and expelled the Royalist garrison, along with their allies in government. The change proved a blessing for the city’s Puritans, including my brother-in-law, Edward. Rather than hiding their Puritanism—under a bushel, they would say—the godly were now free to do as they pleased. Edward and the other Aldermen replaced the King’s priests with ministers who loved the sermon above all else and disdained the beauty of holiness. In their fervor, they stripped the cathedral of its silver candlesticks and destroyed the memorial to Thomas à Becket. Nor was the Minster alone in its suffering: the godly had pulled the stained glass windows out of Coneystreet’s church, and ordered crucifixes—“idols,” they called them—be taken down throughout the city. I had been able to protect my parish of St. Helen’s from such thefts, but most had not been so lucky.

Nor had the godly’s efforts to transform the city stopped with churches, for they also sought to reform the churchgoers and to drive both sin and sinners from the city. In this matter, I found myself of two minds. I could not deny that a magistrate who suppressed vice did God’s work; who but the devil would defend adultery and Sabbath-breaking? And if a sermon could save one of York’s maidens from falling into bastardy, it was well preached. But from the beginning it seemed to me that some among the godly would take their reformation further and faster than seemed prudent. I had no quarrel with those who would punish fornicators or brawlers, but their interference in harmless pastimes such as playing at bowls, which I quite enjoyed, seemed to do more harm than good. God would not damn me for my bowling or my silk skirts—as some of the wilder clergy claimed—any more than He would damn the goldsmiths for loaning money to the city.

When Martha and I entered my home, Hannah met us at the door. Hannah had been with me for more than twenty years, since I was a girl in Hereford. She had seen me married and widowed twice, and attended me upon the birth and burial of both my children. I could not wish for a more

constant and faithful servant. But Hannah was growing old, so Martha's arrival had come as a relief, as she shared Hannah's household duties and assisted me in my midwifery. By now, she and Martha had become close. As I listened to the two of them chatting in the kitchen while they prepared supper, my mind drifted to the day Martha had appeared at my door just over a year before.

She had slipped into York even as Parliament's armies laid siege to the city, and claimed that she had been a servant for my cousin in Hereford. When she produced a letter testifying to her honesty and diligence, I took her in. I should have been more suspicious of her, of course. How many young women could evade two different armies and sneak into a walled city? Not long after she arrived, the truth about Martha's past began to come out. While Martha *had* come from Hereford, she'd never served my cousin. Rather, she had fled a lecherous and abusive master only to fall in with her brother, a notorious housebreaker and highwayman. She came to York in order to escape the criminal life into which he'd lured her, but she brought with her the skills of a burglar and cutpurse.

These were not abilities she needed often, but they proved useful the previous year when my friend Esther Cooper was wrongly accused of petty treason for the crime of murdering her husband. The Lord Mayor demanded her conviction to show the fate that awaited all those who "rebelled against their natural lords" (as he put it), and the city council, including my brother-in-law, Edward, obliged, sentencing my friend to burn. I was horrified at such an injustice, so Martha and I took upon us the task of finding the real murderer. Our search led us from the city's most dangerous and disreputable brothel to the parlor of its most powerful man, and might have killed the both of us, had it not been for Martha's "special skills." In the end, Ellen went free and Martha became my deputy.

I don't know if Martha ever regretted her decision to pursue a more respectable life, but she had proven herself a capable apprentice, and I knew that in time she would be a fine midwife. What struck me most when I considered the past year was that despite the difference in our ranks, which could hardly have been greater, we'd become fast friends. I would have thought such a transformation impossible, but the dangers we'd faced together as we hunted for a vicious murderer and the hours we'd spent together talking about childbirth had acted as a philosopher's stone, turning a maidservant and her mistress into comrades.

My reverie was broken by someone rapping urgently at my door.

“Hannah!” a voice called out. “Martha, Aunt Bridget, open the door!”

I recognized the voice of my nephew Will, and rushed to see what was the matter. I opened the door and he tumbled in, slamming the door behind him. Without a word, and barely slowed by the cane he used to walk, Will rushed past me into the parlor and peered between the curtains onto the street.

“Will!” I cried. “What in heaven are you doing?” He didn’t answer but continued staring intently out the window. “Will!”

“It’s all right, Aunt Bridget,” he said. He glanced over his shoulder and I saw that he had been fighting again. His left eye would soon be swollen shut, and a trickle of blood oozed from a cut on his forehead.

“For God’s sake, Will, what is going on? Who is after you?”

Will laughed derisively and I could smell the liquor on his breath. “Who isn’t? The sons of bitches who hit me from behind, the churchwardens seeking Sabbath-breakers, the beadle trying to find whoever brawled in the alehouse ... it could be any of them. It looks like they lost the trail, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.” He turned away from the window and walked past me. “Do you have any wine? I’m not drunk enough yet.”

Also by Sam Thomas

The Midwife's Tale: A Mystery
The Harlot's Tale: A Midwife Mystery

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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